A PECULIAR HAPPINESS

March 4, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 2, selected verses
Matthew 5:1-11

"How happy are the poor in spirit..."
--Matthew 5:2
(The Jerusalem Bible)

If you frequent bookstores or even the paperback shelves in the corner drugstore, or if you make it your business to know what American people are reading about - or if you know what kinds of seminars and workshops and adult education classes American people are spending their money to attend these days, you will have made an interesting discovery. We are very much concerned about, focused on, and spending our money for "Recovery." "Recovery" from whatever it is that ails us, and these days the fashionable words for that "whatever" are Codependence and Addictive Behavior.

In a feature article in The New York Times Book Review, "Chances Are You're Codependent Too," the author revealed that there are no fewer than 80 books available to help you deal with your codependent, addictive behavior. Some of them are silly. Some are full of helpful insights and wisdom. Spokespersons for the codependent movement assert that 96% of the American people suffer codependence and addiction. We know about alcoholism and one of the important things we have learned is how a person suffering from the disease is often supported or enabled by people around him and her, who mean well, but who are also involved in addictive or codependent behavior. We are not unfamiliar with workaholism as a way to describe a familiar and deadly addiction of the upwardly mobile and ambitious. Some of us know a lot about a quiet little addiction that allows us to end up in front of the vending machine at 4:15 every afternoon, acting as if it is all a lovely coincidence - our being here and the Snickers Bar there and two quarters just happen to be in our pocket - chocoholism! We are told we are a compulsive, addictive nation. We are sexaholics, rageaholics, shopaholics, rushaholics, churchaholics. Harvard Psychiatrist Robert Coles quips that we're soon going to have special support groups for third cousins of excessive sherry drinkers.

Where is this coming from? What is it about us that compels our attention and our money in such a dramatic fashion? What is it about? What does it mean? Some of it, I think, is merely trendy. But not all of it, by no means. Most of it, I believe, has its source deep in the human spirit. The explanation is clear, I believe. It was put concisely by the President of Health Communications, Inc. who said, "A lot of people are looking at why they're not happy." [New York Times Book Review, 2/11/90, Wendy Kaminer]

Jesus of Nazareth, one day at the beginning of the venture, took his disciples aside, the ones who had decided to commit their lives to following him, sat down in their midst to teach them some basic understandings of the life they had chosen, and within ear-shot of a large crowd of people who had been following them around Galilee he said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." Blessed are those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

It sounds so comforting. "Blessed." "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine." "Blest be the Tie that Binds." Blessed - it is one of the softest words in our religious vocabulary. And, we now know, that it isn't particularly accurate. What Jesus was talking about is not addressed by the meanings Blessedness has accumulated. There is nothing sanctimonious, or grimly pious about it. The word means a "state of happiness," enjoyed by the gods.... It is full of fervor and joy and exuberance. "How fortunate" one translation renders it.

"**Happy** are the poor in spirit" is generally regarded as the best English translation. And now these comfortable euphemisms take on a new character. They are not about sitting in a church singing 19th century hymns. They are about a state of happiness, a condition of the heart, a fervent, resonant joy rooted deeply in the human spirit. Suddenly these blessings take on the power to jar us. Startle us, even address our deepest needs and obsessions -

"Happy are those who mourn
How happy the meek
Fortunate are those who hunger and thirst..."

A very peculiar happiness. At the beginning of the adventure, Jesus proposes something which is startling and radical and powerful. It is as relevant as the phenomenon of Recovery Literature. It stood in sharp contrast to the way his contemporaries lived their lives, established priorities and spent their money no less than it contrasts with our own.

What do you want? What do you really want? My guess is that regardless of the length, weight, literary sophistication of your answer - it would not, in the final analysis, be very far from "to be happy." It is why we work hard: it is our hope and our dream...

I discovered an interesting exegesis of our search for happiness in the January issue of Fortune - ("What Consumers Want in the 1990s"). The

article documented the end of the materialistic 80s by analyzing the new emphasis in advertising.

> "Suddenly all those highly polished, career-obsessed men and women who worked hard, played hard and seemed bent on raising self-absorption to an art are disappearing. In their place Adland is giving us a picture of American life straight out of W. C. Fields' worst nightmare: adorable kiddies, cuddly puppy dogs and sentiment galore."

A mother and two kids are eating in the kitchen. It's morning. The phone rings. It's dad, eating Raisin Bran in his hotel room in another city. "I just thought we could have breakfast together," he says. "Hammering at the heart strings will be the predominant theme in consumer marketing for the 1990s," predicts the article.

Even religion and God are making a market comeback. The new slogan for Kleenex Tissues is "God bless you."

We have come to the end of a decade in which the pursuit of happiness was cast simply in terms of winning, earning, succeeding, buying... The "me" mythology is over it would seem. Or at least it's more vulgar expression. Narcissism appears as dead as the Junk Bond industry. Futurist Arnold Brown, to whom marketers are listening carefully, says we are in the middle of "a groundswell of longing for some permanent, transcendent set of values."

"Happy are the poor in spirit." It's not merely an admonition to tone down the garish materialism of the 80s to a more sedate and socially acceptable moderation. Jesus wants to redefine happiness, start the discussion at the beginning. We're not talking about happiness as a Ford Taurus instead of a BMW, or Seiko instead of Rolex. We're talking about an assault on a way of thinking that posits happiness as something we can earn, win, desire, strive for and achieve at all. Startle us, O God!

Crusty old Malcom Muggeridge, British journalist, a late convert back to Christianity, has it right, even though it makes me very uncomfortable to read his words:

> "The poor are blessed. Today this amounts to blasphemy. Set up in type it will positively melt the lead; produced in a television studio it will cause a deadly hush. The poor blessed! How in God's name can that be? It is a denial of our whole way of life; a contradiction of everything we believe in.
>
> "With us, affluence is religion. 'Buy this in remembrance of me.' And then he tells a story about sitting with Mother Teresa - whose life moved Muggeridge to reconsider the Gospel - in a New York television studio while she was being interviewed by a man in a mauve shirt with a drooping moustache and sad eyes peering out through thick spectacle lenses...every minute or so he broke off for a commercial. That morning they were all about packaged foods which promised not to be fattening or very nourishing. Mother Teresa, thinking no doubt of the human skeletons she tried

> to clothe in a little flesh, listened with a kind of wonder, and then, in her soft but clearly audible voice, broke in to remark 'I see that Christ is needed in television studios.' Everyone heard her, and a strange silence descended on the studio. I half expected an enraged figure to appear, rope in hand, as he had at Jerusalem, to drive us all out, eyes ablaze. 'You bastards! You and your unnourishing bread!' He did not come, but Mother Teresa's words continued to echo in the hearts of those who heard them." [Jesus, the Man Who Lives, Malcolm Muggeridge, p. 112, 113]

Jesus said: "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Muggeridge has the right perspective, I believe, and the right degree of intensity. These sayings, these blessings, are not sanctimonious euphemisms, they are not intellectual puzzles, nor are they admonitions to moderate our appetites and become a little more poor in spirit, a little more meek and merciful. They make very little logical sense. If they are not that or a new set of rules, the hour to hour obeying of which will save your soul, then what in the world are they?

They are a description of human happiness and they are Gospel. They are the Good News that Jesus Christ, God's son, is the Savior and there is none other.

They are startling descriptions of what life is like when and where he is the Lord.

They point to him, the Lamb of God. They describe the life he lived. They describe how it is when he is present.

And they measure and judge the life we live, the behavior to which we are addicted, the dependencies we establish in order to be happy - to be joyful - to be saved.

They are, I believe with everything in me, God's truth which always judges our truth. Not happy are the wealthy and powerful... we know better.

Happy - are those who know that ultimately we own nothing, and that if we are willing to give our lives to the pursuit of wealth, power, prestige, influence - we will have given our lives to a very fragile and most temporary kingdom.

Happy - are those who know that we are not forever young and strong and aggressive and who therefore will not have to spend the last four decades of the precious time we are given pretending they are something they are not.

Happy - are those who know that there is truth and beauty and goodness in the world beyond that which I have experienced - and who therefore are perpetually humble and hungry.

Happy - are the meek - those who know that no ideology ever saved anybody, nor will it save us - not Imperialism, not Marxism, not Leninism, not even Market Capitalism.

These beatitudes - blessings - are a summons to a conversion: to a new way of thinking and being: they are an invitation to be honest about what we actually own and to acknowledge our poverty and our mortality.

These beatitudes are for those who know that their eternal destiny is in hands other than their own.

"Give me the man who yearns," said St. Augustine centuries ago. "Give me one who is hungry: give me one far away in the desert who is thirsty and sighs for the springs of the eternal. Give me that sort of men and women. They know what I mean." [Muggeridge, op. cit.]

These blessings contain a radical and startling proposal, namely that God's Kingdom is where happiness is. God's Kingdom is not some far away Shangri-la above the clouds. But it is those times, those places, those situations in which God is God, in which God actually reigns, in which for Christians, Jesus is the Christ, the Lord, with its peculiar happiness.

We believe God's Reign breaks into the world in ways we do not always recognize anymore than his contemporaries did, or even his friends for that matter, recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. But, to be a Christian, to be his man or woman today is to live in expectation and anticipation and confidence, that his Kingdom, where the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek - are blessed. That Kingdom is always breaking in, showing up in the life of this world...

When Vaclav Havel, the new president of Czechoslovakia, spoke to the United States Congress a few weeks ago, it was a moment of enormous significance, a moment of almost Biblical proportion. Havel was a political prisoner a few months ago. He is a writer, a poet and to the legislators of the most powerful nation in the world he said that apart from a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness nothing much will change...

> "Responsibility to something higher than my family, country, company, success; responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged... The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human heart to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility."

"Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," said Jesus.

To be a Christian is to be happy: not at our success, buying power, military security or sexual prowess, but in the confidence that God's Kingdom is coming.

Sometimes it comes dramatically - when a political revolution brings a poet into office who then says that our hope is in meekness and mercy and responsibility.

And sometimes God's Kingdom and its peculiar happiness comes when brave men and women will not compromise with injustice and become the blessed persecuted.

And it comes quietly... when the bread and wine of Communion are shared with a young man who is critically ill and faith shouts that there is nothing in creation that separates us from God's love in Jesus Christ and, therefore, those who mourn will be comforted.

God's Kingdom, with its peculiar happiness, comes when we summon courage to reach across barriers of hostility and love enemies, or across barriers of cruel silence and boredom and quiet alienation and love the persons closest and dearest to us.

It is Gospel.

This happiness begins when we, like that blessed company 2,000 years ago, stop talking long enough to listen to him: when we, like them, allow him to sit in our midst and teach us... when we, in the midst of our feverish, frantic quest to get it all - stop; stop striving and pressing and pushing and allow a turning, a change, a conversion: when we actually entertain the notion that in Christ God loves us and comes to us and gives us this peculiar happiness.

It is a summons, finally, to listen to him, to love him and rely on him. Blessed - Happy - are we when Jesus of Nazareth, this strange and compelling man, becomes our Christ, our Lord, our Master and friend.

Blessed be He.

Amen.